

Trespass into the Liminal Urban Exploration in Estonia

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines narratives of trespass. It analyses relations between the personal and the social in abandoned urban physical surroundings. Grounded in our own duo-auto-ethnographic encounters with off-limit places, the research examines the classic notion of liminality through a set of prisms that are less than orthodox. It does so by stressing the formative and transformative possibilities of those threshold spaces that often get bypassed, surpassed or trespassed. Through a series of vignettes describing moments of urban exploration in different parts of Estonia, our implicit aim is to unsettle such conceptual categories as risk and adventure, material decay and transgression. Explicitly, we argue for revisiting storytelling tropes such as the *flâneur* or the stalker, freeing them up from their respective leisure and pastime associations.

KEYWORDS

liminality, threshold, trespass, spatial storytelling, urban exploration

Adventure has the gesture of the conqueror, the quick seizure of opportunity ... the complete self-abandonment to the powers and accidents of the world, which can delight us, but in the same breath can also destroy us.

—Georg Simmel, ‘The Adventure’

One cold, dry weekend afternoon in October 2013, during a short research visit to Narva (the Estonian ‘Detroit’, on the border with Russia), the two of us, joined by another mate, spontaneously entered an abandoned building. It was near a large shopping centre, randomly found whilst strolling through town. The fairly big structure had likely been a residential apartment complex. Its roof was still mostly intact, but all the fixtures, windows and doors had since been taken out or broken. A concrete enclosure, two and a half metres tall, fenced off the entire area so as to prevent any trespassers.

‘Trespassing’ is an idiom from Old French meaning to ‘pass beyond or to move across’ in a way that infringes, violates or is attained through some form of unlawful entry. As a deterrent, this fence was not an especially suitable impediment. After jumping over without dif-



ficulty, we found ourselves in an oasis of dereliction and rawness. We could detect evidence that some people had recently been occupying the premises, as there was a clothing line between some small trees with fresh washing hanging from it. The doors and windows at ground level had been sealed off, so we gained entry via some large windows on the floor above, accessed by stepping on the branches of some of the bigger trees and using some simple climbing holds. Once inside, after a couple of minutes to size up the conditions of the ground, littered with rubbish, we heard a few small stones and half bricks land nearby. We discussed for a few seconds whether this had been deliberate or the result of our movements, which might have dislodged some of the rubble of this structurally unsound Soviet-era ruin.

Before much time had elapsed, however – and after one of our party had already bolted back to the entrance – more bricks came crashing down. Were the floors above about to collapse on us? Not wishing to waste any time in sticking around to find out, we left with much more haste and agility than had been manifested upon entering. In circling the building a few moments later, we heard some laughter, and a few young heads began poking out of the windows from one of the higher floors. A small gang of four or five children had not wanted to share their precious playground, reminding us of how kids both play in these types of prescribed settings and also do their own explorations, protective of such raw *res derelictae* space.



Figure 1: Laviolette entering into an abandoned building in Narva, Oct 2013. Photo by Francisco Martinez



Figure 2: Over the fence in an abandoned building Narva, Oct 2013. Photo by Patrick Laviolette

Grounded in auto-ethnographic encounters with off-limit places – analytically describing our own personal experience – we set an archetype of the urban explorer and try to answer related questions, including: In which way do liminal experiences shape our personality in late modernity? What do thresholds in this era look like? Which temporal qualities do they entail? Is the deviant behaviour of urban explorers a reaction against the excessive normalisation and mediation of everyday life? Based on personal insights, we outline narratives of trespassing and analyse relations between the personal and the social in precarious physical surroundings. Urban exploration (*urbex*) is here taken as an out of the ordinary stamping experience, which foregrounds our intersubjectivity, binding thought, imagination and agency.

In short, our research stresses the formative and transformative possibilities of those urban threshold spaces. It provides an encapsulated attempt to reconsider liminality's temporary sequences in relation to sites of urban decay. As part of this strategic methodological stance, grounded in an ethically minded intersubjective approach to this type of risk-inducing project, we have explicitly chosen to use both ourselves and each other as key informants (cf. Chatham-Carpenter 2010). This contribution thus fits into what has been termed duo-ethnography, aligning itself more specifically with the 'concurrent collaborative model' (Ngunjiri et al. 2010: 7), whereby we have assisted one another

with each part of this research, from the fieldwork through to the writing and dissemination.

Disappear Here

Those who do not have a good place to hide are incapable of enjoying a good life, argued Kierkegaard, the philosopher preoccupied with hope and despair. There is a certain mystery and unpredictability in the mandates of personal dispositions. We all know plenty of writers, artists and thinkers who vanished from the world, abandoning their creative work without any apparent reason. They followed the temptation of disappearing, wandering off the map, going off-grid, of contesting established canons, orders and expectations. People such as Rimbaud (dealing with slavery), Wittgenstein (school teaching) or Duchamp (chess playing) decided to radically change their lives because of personal dispositions that go from breakdowns to lack of interest in fame or power. Some others, like J. D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon, masked themselves behind their writing. We could describe this tactic as the art of ambiguity – becoming invisible, vanishing mid-party, publicly escaping (à la Harry Houdini). Indeed, the magic escapism of Houdini can be understood as both a symbol of modernity and resistance to certain modern processes.

Personal dispositions do not require a historical cause. Yet they are certainly influenced by cultural currents and the socioeconomic environment. One of the aims here is therefore to study how personal dispositions influence our interaction with the cityscape, to the point of driving us to derelict sites and engaging in transgressive, often illicit, activities. Euphoria, sensation seeking and the pleasures of subversive tension are here taken as factors intimately related to exploring. We posit that urban trespass is an eventful escape from which multiple (and apparently contradictory) feelings can both arise and derive. Moreover, we suggest that the increasing popularity of these ambiguous adventures is related to globalisation, late modernity and their interrelated implications (uncertainties, security threats, quotidian transgression of norms and traditions, social acceleration, relentless change and innovation, disappearance of metanarratives, increasing regulation over urban space, post-Fordist industrial decay and the ubiquitous presence of the media).

If in the 1970s a main cultural transgression was to be on the road, today a parallel phenomenon relates to the capacity of disappearing,

whether in the form of fading, ‘digital detox’ or escaping the grid. Yet vanishing today is not so easy; it requires thick bones and a sophisticated strategy (otherwise we might be persecuted more fanatically). Cultural critic Matias Serra Bradford (2014) writes that contemporary societies are less tolerant of the attempts to escape from the system, yet are simultaneously fascinated with those individuals who achieved it. Late modernity brought two major differences to transgressive experiences. Namely, they do not require a spatiotemporal distancing, and leisure/work cannot be separated as such when analysing these practices. No pilgrimage, theatre or carnival is expected or required for transgressive performances – anywhere and any time are subject to becoming a ‘zone’ of magical togetherness, a space in-between.

Likewise, changes in labour conditions, modes of production and spaces of consumption made obsolete the understanding of work as social structure and leisure as ‘antistructure’. On the one hand, notions of exception and norm, order and disorder, working time and vacation are less clear than before. On the other, late modern transgressions pervade in the quotidian, in introducing the out of the ordinary as part of everyday spectacles. Transgression does not transgress. Rather, it calls for another limit. George Bataille echoed Victor Turner in arguing that transgressions validate and complement the current status quo through a dialectical interdependence between excess and order. Deviancies are not aberrant to order and hegemony, but a dynamic force that relies on prohibition and enjoyment, terror and fascination. To describe this, Bataille refers to ‘the pleasure of going to see “freaks”’ (1985: 3), whereas Slavoj Žižek (2003) questions the effectiveness of transgressions in late modern societies, as contemporary regulations also establish modes of transgression themselves.

Our conduct and cultural frames are being shaped by processes that combine mediatisation, an intense transmission of information, the commodification of culture and an extensive surveillance of public spaces. Additionally, the reconstitution of our locality and identity is increasingly shaped by (economic and cultural) trends coming from beyond. Global networks push to rearticulate spatial patterns of behaviour, and with them, the way people give meaning to themselves and the world in which they live. This is an arena that sees the traditional power of identity diminished, as individuals engage in new place-bound activities from which they derive new cultural forms of personhood. In a way, such a postulate is reminiscent of Nigel Rapport’s (2012) ideas about the cosmopolitan ‘Anyone’. In his accounts, cosmopolitanism is a window that allows individual emancipation,

human expression and personal becoming. Anyone appears as the actor who has the capacity to create their own identity above any membership in social groupings or cultural traditions, making such attributes as accidental and temporary as possible.

In Estonia, an example of this has been graffiti art, which allows people to be beyond customary cultural states and local rituals. For instance, Bach, one of Tartu's graffiti pioneers, claims that behind this practice there is a will 'to find yourself' and 'to stand out', and with that in mind, 'we got our ideas from rap videos where the walls were colourful. The rest we did ourselves ... you can call it lifestyle. We did not want to copy anyone, but we still mimicked the guys in the rap videos'. Also, Barthol Lo Mejor, a practitioner of the 'noughties' generation, acknowledges the significance of the Internet to find inspiration as well as to search for individual emancipation: 'It was escapism in a way, because you do not identify with the world around you, and your stuff is not organically tied to it; then it is escapism ... those guys were not interested in what they saw around them. So they imported that whole world; in a sense, a world within a world' (statement included in the documentary of the exhibition *Typical Individuals: Graffiti and Street Art in Tartu 1994–2014*). Curator Marika Agu calls them 'typical individuals', 'following examples from abroad, combining foreign behavioural principles and exemplars with personal ambitions and soul-searchings' (2014: 8).

Graffiti culture works in Estonia as a postmodern variant of liminal acts. It subverts the categorical organisation of urban space, introducing unforeseen elements of change in the social system, allowing individuals to free themselves from prevailing customs. Its ludic and voluntary character allows graffiti to fit into what Turner (1974) described as 'liminoid', referring to the quasi-liminal character of cultural performances of modern societies, usually produced by small groups not deeply integrated into the collective. Based on his observation of human experience in small-scale societies (rites of initiation), van Gennep (1960) proposed a threefold structure: separation, suspension and reintegration, placing the emphasis on the transformation of the subject in a social setting. In this scheme, liminality referred to the phase of suspension, in other words, to in-between situations that involve a change of status and, eventually, the resolution of a personal crisis. Turner (1974) recovered this sequential structure of ritual processes for his studies on Ndembu's rites of transition, though he split the liminal suspension into two distinct periods: crisis and re-dression. He also explained that the crisis stage functioned as a thresh-



Figure 3: Agree in action, Lisbon August 2014. Photo by Marika Agu

old – a moment of meaning formation and condensed symbolism, which entailed an intense becoming.

Against the clear-cut distinction between sacred ancient rituals and their contemporary versions, this article aims to show that contemporary liminal experiences also have a formative impact on the subject involved in this reflexive playfulness and role-playing. Likewise, we note the capacity of urban exploration to effect substantive changes that directly impact social order. Foremost, such activities appear to us as ‘biopolitical’ transgressions in which ‘space hackers’ test and taste an undesigned, unruly side of life. With the term ‘biopolitics’, Foucault designated the way dimensions of power, body and knowledge were brought together in political modernity (2004). By analysing historically these dimensions, Foucault argued that the power over life (the disciplining of the individual) and the regulation of the body collectively were at the centre of the social order established by liberal and capitalist states. In putting the focus on risk and often illegal practices, we want to study a new set of relations between body, space and power. For instance, Agree, an artist based in Lisbon, describes graffiti as an ‘unordinary hobby’, ‘liberating body movement’ and ‘mentally stimulating’. These descriptions could also be applied to urban exploration, an activity that Agree often practices too. ‘I knew it was a matter of time that I will get caught by police’, Agree confessed. In his case, hand in hand with graffiti came urban exploration and then squatting in abandoned apartments in London. Graffiti writers and

urban explorers share an affection for antistructure and alterity, intending to reimagine what already exists otherwise. They also have in common a certain egomania, as Agree admits: ‘Many people would deny it, but ego and fame play a big part. There is also a will to escape from the true self’ (see also Martínez 2015a).

Graffiti and urban exploration are experiences of personal liberation – as a body and as a subject. Practitioners are affected by a mood of foreignness and motivated by authorship. If graffiti writers are occupied in leaving a personal print on the city, urban explorers aim to discover and document those spaces that appear inaccessible or forbidden. Withal, neither graffiti writers nor urban explorers aim to get involved in discussions about what should be preserved and constructed, what is right or wrong, legal or illegal – they simply assert that ‘everywhere is free space’, questioning the prevailing spatial structure. In their illegal activities, they intensively interact with materials and places, painting, collecting souvenirs, sometimes simply trespassing. These acts involve the experience of participation and have transformative potential. Practitioners oscillate between the opticality of the *flâneur* and the tacticity of the *glaneur*, telling stories beyond the city’s confines or within the city’s intestines. They engage in a no longer, not yet condition, a pure act of becoming, a generated limbo, which changes those who pass through. These practices are in line with Walter Benjamin’s understanding of the *flâneur*, a figure who opposes the mental and sensorial overstimulation of urban life (Simmel [1910] 1997) by displaying a low tempo and by ignoring the modern distinction between private and public space: ‘For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of space, of moments and of discontinuities’ (Benjamin 1979: 295).

Our subjectivity is produced by the various character-defining roles we find ourselves playing. Such roles eventually have implications by the way they affect social relations. The body inhabits places, is inhabited by ideas and sees itself through representations. The combination of the three produces a sense of the self and creates a life story. Although playful and unstructured, the liminal experience is highly structuring and formative for the subject. In situations of heightened consciousness, it induces affective responses and allows a sense of spatial connection to arise rapidly (Dekeyser and Garrett 2015). As our ethnography shows, standing on the limits generates a hypersensual experience that poignantly expresses personal desires and anxieties. Indeed, our craving for liminal experiences is directly related to irrup-

tions of existential crisis and can be explained as ‘strategic dissonances’ (Kim 2015) and the result of individual retro-reactions, which answer to the excessive acceleration and immediacy of our late-modern living (Martínez 2015b)

As with graffiti art, urban exploration is not only spatial, but also temporal and momentous. In the sense of it being processual, as well as related to unexpected encounters with remnants from different historical periods, practitioners of these activities can be described as underground *flâneurs* and ersatz archaeologists. The increasing fascination for urban exploration in Western societies might even be indicative of the archaeological turn in popular culture. As a form of contemporary archaeology, *urbex* emphasises the transitoriness of our existence, the uncertainty of being and the instability of meaning. It also helps to reframe – in an allegorical way – what is lost in changes and remnant spaces abandoned by capital disinvestment. For instance, in Tallinn there has been a postsocialist acceleration of the cityscape, facilitated by deindustrialising processes and the decay of modernist architecture, as well as the extension of spaces of intensive leisure and consumption.

Accordingly, many memorials and buildings have vanished in the last decades or are about to disappear, producing an epistemological disruption. The redundant mélange of elements and lack of contextual fit, saturation and redundancy are evidence that the Estonian capital is not simply a postsocialist city, but an urban archipelago produced by the cumulative effect of unfinished projects of modernisation. This pothole character of Tallinn is manifested in a peculiar abundance of threshold experiences and in a sense of jumping from one island to another when crossing neighbourhoods in the city. The reference to potholes is both interesting and most likely deliberate, since a lot of development money from the EU for improving Estonia’s transport networks in the last five years has gone into road repair. All in all, to traverse the city reminds us of an amalgam of passages – a threshold experience (Martínez 2014b).

Sensation Seeking

In *Access All Areas*, Ninjalicious defines urban exploration as ‘an interior tourism that allows the curious-minded to discover a world of behind-the-scenes sights’ (2005: 3). More recently, and more specifically, Bradley Garrett has presented urban explorers as seekers of a

deeper meaning in the city and in the everyday, arguing that urban exploration is about trespassing ‘simply for the joy of doing so ... in the spirit of freedom and tackling challenges ... precisely because they are forbidden’ (2013a: 14–27). Urban exploration is thus an activity that provides the chance to experience time and space differently – ‘these moments of liminality ... are what we search for’ (Garrett 2011a: 1049). He further asserts that none of the practitioners are experts, using untested equipment and following a purely recreational purpose. This shows the common approach to risk and safety among urban explorers. Practitioners actively engage with their environment, creating new sensuous dispositions and porous encounters of exchange between body and city. These interventions are not searches for profit and do not intend to build a ‘new’ grand narrative of resistance or revolution. Rather, explorers aim to create alternative models of action and undermine public narratives about what can and should be done (Garrett 2013b).

The progressive charge of urban exploration has nonetheless been questioned by Mott and Roberts (2014), who note that these practices and discourses of embodiment equally generate their own exclusions, privileging the creation of a certain type of explorer-subject. All in all, urban exploration means different things to different people. For Paiva it is ‘a pastime as old as mankind’ (2008: 9); whilst High and Lewis (2007: 55–63) reduce urban exploration to a shallow spectator sport practiced by ‘white, middle class ... in their teens and twenties ... more interested in aesthetics than history’. For Garrett, on the other hand, urban exploration is something deeper than a leisure activity, striving for an identity (subject-construction) understanding of the practice: ‘exploration is not something you do, it’s who you are’ (2012), opening up the possibility for ‘radical subjectivity’. In our view, engaging in urban exploration provides personal awareness and acute self-consciousness; hence, it brings about a deep relationship between inwardness and outwardness that can be both liminal and cathartic (Laviolette 2015; Martínez 2015a).

In considering such an illicit activity, we reflect upon the personal dispositions that lead individuals to confront ‘riskscapes’ voluntarily. This is reminiscent of the growing desire for personal experiences within Western societies, which leads eventually to an increasing multiplicity and discontinuity of the experiential, as well as to a differing relation between excess and shortage. We mean moments of intense experience, discontinuous from the rest, cut off from the everyday sensorium. As a vivid and intense exploration in which we move away

from the centre, urban exploration can be aligned with Simmel's understanding of the adventure: 'a third thing' that enables people to interrupt the prevailing flow of everyday life; an incidental experience in which 'we abandon ourselves to the world with fewer defences and reserves than in any other relation' (1997: 225–6).

Exploration creates an eclectic play with history, urban forms and social norms. This is facilitated by social acceleration, global scales and post-Fordist decay, as well as the modern ambition for heightened leisure and freedom from social restraint. The wider control over danger and risk paradoxically produces a stronger obsession with the inability to deal with fear. In a security-prone society, danger becomes a space for freedom by challenging the limits of normative boundaries (Campos 2013). So what to do if we just keep breaking out harder? The interaction with material and social surroundings is certainly faster and intensively mediated, which frequently appears as a justification put forward by many thrill-seeking daredevils. Feelings of excess have been intensified, to the point that we have the sensation of always missing something. Hartmut Rosa (2013) remarks that no matter how fast we become, the proportion of the experiences we continuously have shrinks in the face of those missed, producing a society more vulnerable to depressions and burnouts as well as increasing the danger of falling behind. Eventually, social acceleration provokes a rapid replacement of frames of meaning. This makes our personal experiences and our society harder to comprehend, and thus less adaptive to change.

Besides the melancholic turbo *flâneur*, another archetype that epitomises the ideas of fading away and embodied imagination could be the morose Tarkovskian 'stalker'. In this Soviet film (1979), two main protagonists (a scientist and a writer) are led by a mercenary guide, the stalker, into a forbidden and foreboding 'zone'. They wander through this dangerous, postapocalyptic landscape as plunderers preparing a foray, diving into urban decay and making connections between inside and outside. The zone thus becomes a sort of eventful escape. It is certainly a liminal space in which norms are suspended, multiple time regimes unfold and the material world turns into an agent of history. Such sites situate us in a different position towards patterns of normality, bringing about remote trajectories, fantasies and reconstructions. These threshold zones entail uniqueness, instability and unreproducibility. Indeed, to enter into the zone we need a quasi-ritualised stalker to show us the way. In a tricksterish and playful way, stalkers prevent us from falling into traps. They spin stories that

contribute to their own mythologisation, generating an atmosphere of limbo that mirrors a daydream. The zone is thus constituted through several acts: a personal experience; an act of storytelling; and the articulation of a spatial absence. The dialectic inside/outside is fundamental for the zone. On the one hand, 'being there' (*être-là*) is required as much as taking distance. On the other, the border between inside and outside is a confused hum that cannot be easily located and in which details become vast (see Bachelard 1994: 215–17).

What is interesting about the zone and this film's mythology more generally is the way in which devoted urban explorers have continued for decades to investigate and physically appropriate some of the sites associated with this cult classic. Indeed, in 2011, when Tallinn was European Capital of Culture, the city inaugurated the Stalker '11 Festival of Contemporary Fairytales. This event captured the public's imagination and deliberately placed some of the city's architectural sites into a historical legacy that celebrates dystopian narratives and industrial heritage. Here excitement is not just conspicuous. It is also landscaped in manifestly excessive ways, from awkward behaviours to risk taking or breaking the law. Transgression, reflexivity and storytelling are therefore key terms in our research. In pondering over such epistemological and ontological matters, our portrayals depict how these 'eventsapes' are constructed and conveyed through personal dispositions, including euphoria, the urge for border crossing as well as addictions to adrenaline or a blasé attitude in the face of danger. There are moments when feeling exceeds perception, in spite of arising in an immediate encounter with precarious surroundings. Such experiences are 'dream-like, they carry an uplifting charge, loaded with significance that cannot be articulated with any exactitude' (Lavolette 2014: 265–6).

Sometimes, it is precisely the act of renunciation that represents a lived experience, that which enables our understanding, whereby meanings are allowed to emerge from guesses and bounded contextualisations, even those that are not always visible (Martínez 2014a). Dispositions are altogether part of any lived experience; thus, happiness and fear, euphoria and anxiety concern the study of urbanity as much as literature or psychology. To live in cities is an art of creation as much as a discovery. Urban life rests on special forms of knowledge, networks and connectedness, being heavily mythologised and framed through circulating narratives that condition the empirical experience (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009). Hence, it is not unusual for sensation seekers to appropriate marginalised landscapes of fear and danger by

personifying them with stories and alter egos. They associate such spaces with their own particular dispositions. This gives special relevance to a site and the role of imagination in interacting with our surroundings. Agreeing with Garrett (2011a: 1052), then, through urban exploration ‘individuals take the opportunity to create memories of places that can sit alongside, or at times even undermine, official histories, creating a symbiotic exchange between body and place’.

Autobiographical Dimensions of Risk

In focusing on practices that involve the hazardous use of ‘ruinescapes’, we propose an alternative scenario for considering temporal and spatial discontinuity in human interaction with material and social surroundings. One in which unordinary practices can be interpreted beyond binary notions of experience and imagination, agency and structure, and so on. Hence, in dealing with the participant observation of such fleeting moments of euphoria and danger, the researcher has necessarily reached a new methodological frontier. The most established way we have of exploring this horizon is by the practices of detailed description and participant observation. This involves a domain whereby environment and the self, fear and imagination come together through a curiosity for understanding personal dispositions and sensual regimes. It also raises considerable concern for insurance companies, ethical committees and funding bodies alike.

In our off-limits explorations, auto-ethnography has been a necessary part of examining our own preconceptions and the study of ‘momentous’ interactions with our surroundings. After all, research can be emotional, therapeutic, reflexive and connected to the world of everyday experience (Ellis 1997). We would justify the use of the duo-autobiographical angle simply because we enjoy and learn more about the practice of spatial trespassing by experiencing it with another person. Duo-auto-ethnography engages another researcher to co-construct common and differing experiences in a collaborative dialogic format (Sawyer and Norris 2004). Moreover, as a research method, it leans more towards art practices than scientific accuracy, being evocative instead of analytical. To an extent, this could be seen as quite a fundamental challenge to the anthropological enterprise. The objective here is not so bold as to scrutinise anthropology as a whole, however. Rather, we hope to contribute to a growing conceptual

dialogue about the reflexivity of fieldwork by providing a glimpse into the processes by which anthropologists gather some of their materials of analysis, particularly in this case, when playing with open-ended methods and techniques. Otherwise, when anthropologists do fieldwork ‘at home’, the accountability to those they have studied is more pressing. Hence, a greater reflexivity in our ethnography appears crucial, explaining how we have used ourselves as a resource (Collins and Gallinat 2010).

We do not deny that *urbex* is still a marginal experience (practiced by restless academics and youngsters) mostly occurring illicitly at night. Yet it is a socially symptomatic one. It relates to feelings of autonomy, anonymity and escape from disciplinary control. The nocturnal aspect reinforces its sense of liminality and suspension of normality, as an interstice or time-in-between favoured by the decline of the sun and the release from work. As an embodied expression of the imagination, *urbex* obtains its framework in the interplay between risk and expectation. Danger, dread and anxiety are related to the experience of consciousness and derive from actions that threaten our physical integrity. If we look over the edge, we experience certain levels of vertigo. Yet at the same time, we might feel a terrifying impulse to intentionally throw ourselves down. Jens Zinn notes, for instance, that biographical experiences of risk demonstrate a general need to transform uncertainty and contingency into ‘patterns of expectations which reduce complexity into something more manageable’ (2010: 3). The mere fact that one has the possibility and freedom to do something triggers immense feelings of dread.

Ethics, responsibility and risk usually merge into one, and urban exploration is no exception to this. For instance, one of the times we entered the former Patarei Prison (on Tallinn’s seaside harbour front) was during a frozen night in the middle of February, with a bottle of vodka. We were accompanied by a dozen guests of an academic event. This off-the-record visit had been arranged as an impromptu conference event by ‘bribing’ a guard to let us in after hours. Given the evening’s festivities as well as the ice-cold weather, for which most participants were not suitably attired, the behaviour of many who took this hour-long tour was more than irreverent. Midway through, when confronted with yet another prison chamber that would have stored over seven inmates, half the members of the group started chanting, ‘It’s bloody cold in this cell, it’s bloody cold in this gaol’.

Some weeks after, Laviolette decided to go back to Patarei to ‘apologise’ for what he felt was an offence to the memory of those who

had been imprisoned. However, it was no more an offence than what Martínez encountered there in other visits to the site. For instance, in June 2012, he met the writer Sofi Oksanen, who was preparing a photo shoot. The photographs were later included in the marketing campaign for her book *Kun Kyyhkysed Katosivat* (2012). During Tallinn's Night of Museums celebrated in May 2014, Martínez went to the prison to finally pay a 'civilised' visit. However, the former Soviet prison was not listed among the free museums open to the public for that evening. Quite the opposite, it had been rented for a graduation party. The experience of horror and perversion reached a climax when teenage girls arrived in high heels, stuffed into ice-cream-coloured dresses.

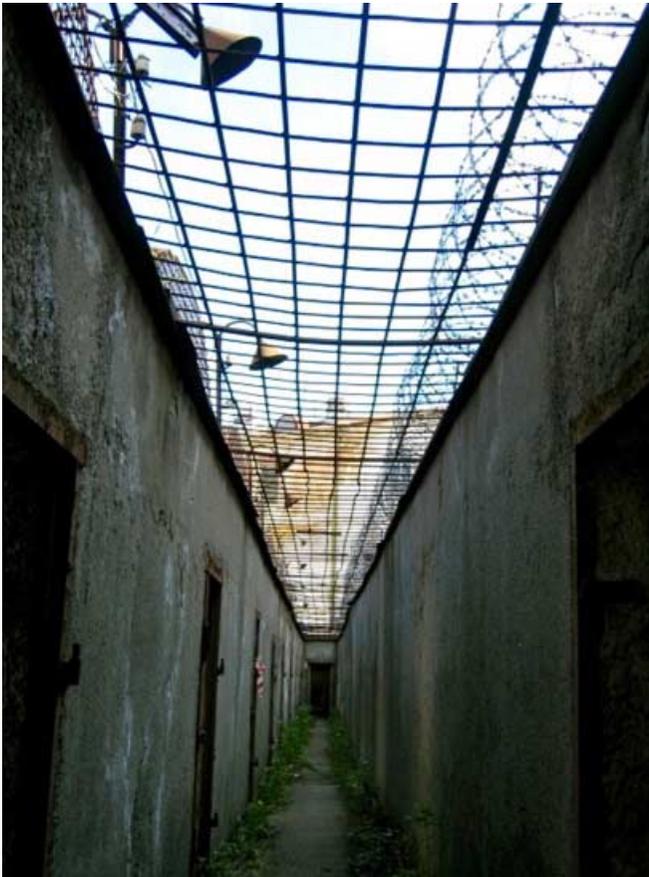


Figure 4: In the Patarei Prison, June 2012. Photo by Francisco Martínez



Figure 5: Execution room in the Patarei Prison, June 2012. Photo by Francisco Martínez

Eventful Escapes

Eventful escapes to desolate and hidden spots act as threshold experiences, which on the whole help to save individuals from being blasé and emotionally numbed. The encounter with material decay makes the body release from self-policing, activating many strings that pull memories and consciousness into awareness (Frers 2013). Material decay invites retrospection and addresses alternative orders (Edensor 2005). It is, in this sense, an invitation to disorder, like the white rabbit conducting Alice into Wonderland. Urban exploration transforms material decay into ‘quasi-ritual landscapes’, merging place and identity through liminal experiences. Echoing Hugo Reinert, then, landscape is simultaneously content and form, a perceptible area and a field of perception. As content, a landscape is made through interdependencies and power relations among actors, which determine the shape; as form, it is constituted by the perspective and cultural baggage of those who perceive it. Altogether, a landscape appears as an organic and heterogeneous entity, constituted by patterns, trajectories, distributions and relationships (Reinert 2015).

By ascribing our own experiences of fear, foreboding and euphoria to certain locales, we may indeed be projecting a flippant sense of risk and recreation. We nevertheless hope to equally convey a more pro-

found type of ‘eventful escape’. Hence, the notion of deep empathy with abandoned sites that we consider here is part of a spatial storytelling. In climbing to the roof of the water tower in Telliskivi, a neighbourhood of Tallinn that is rapidly gentrifying, the mix of curiosity, illegality and danger connects the explorer with the landscape, transmitting affect spatially. Yet this also creates intimacy between the explorers sharing the experience. Paradoxically, such an irresponsible exploration produces a sense of collective responsibility, care for the other and intimate observation of the world. The practice of stretching the mind and body to the limits – of playing with danger – establishes an ontological basis for understanding embodied imagination, as well as acute personal awareness.

We have both independently climbed to the top of a water tower near Tallinn’s central train station. Martínez has done so three times. His explorations were carried out with different people, yet always around the same time and state of mind: at night, between 4:00 and 5:00 AM, whilst being a bit tipsy. In the first exploration, a female friend of Martínez’s acted as a stalker, leading him to the top of this industrial construction, probably in order to impress a person who presents himself as passionate of border crossing. On the other two occasions, Martínez was the one who acted as the stalker, willing to impress his companions by infiltrating into a forbidden haunting spot, whereby one can observe one of the best views in town. Such action can also be impressive because of the feeling of risk and danger that make the explorers suffer from spasms, contractions, shaking, quivering and then euphoric release. All this is what Martínez felt when he wanted to descend and, in the dark, lost sight of the metal stairs, going instead into the main water deposit within the tower. The humidity and darkness felt there, as well as the frailty of the stairs – shaking more than those fixed on the structural wall – made him aware of the risk of falling to the bottom of the inner tank. The first noticeable emotion was a rush of adrenaline. His body was aware of endorphins pumping, awaking his senses and mind as probably no drug can do.

The water tower stands in spite of natural forces such as gravity and decay. This abandoned construction paradoxically defies the uniformity and increasing commodification of the Telliskivi area. In a way, the water tower can be taken as a zone, hosting secrets to be disclosed and connecting inwardness with outwardness. Therefore, when his friend proposed to Martínez to climb up to the roof of this industrial construction, he never doubted it. Beforehand, he had tried to impress



Figure 6: On the roof of the Water Tower in Telliskivi, June 2014. Photo by Iskra Vukšić

her by infiltrating the alarm-guarded space of the Jaama Turg (railway bazaar). But such an experience was not comparable with the ‘epiphany of vision, elevation and subjectivity’ (Wylie 2002: 443) produced after reaching the roof. Besides the physical endeavour and reward of the ascent, one felt there exposed to the elements, a moment of transcendence at the mercy of the wind and corrosion. Sitting on the roof, one felt an uncommon and different form of being high; a place whereby we, as individuals, were just ‘let be’ (Wylie 2002: 452), achieving a symbiosis between thinking, feeling and inhabiting the world (Laviolette 2011).

Urban explorations help to uncover the anthropological interwovenness of contemporary societies. Hence, it is our contention that risk and ambiguous adventures are not simply about hedonism. Rather, they are enactments of an eventful awareness. We can easily map or photograph the water tower of Telliskivi. Yet no such representation can depict the feelings generated while climbing up, reaching its roof and observing the city from such a privileged point. Following the need to better describe momentous interactions with our surroundings, our approach has been intentionally diversified, highlighting heterogeneity and some of the ironies of sociocultural construction. In this sense, it is important for us to also mention that some of the ‘abandoned’ spaces to which we refer here have actually been appropriated and are being used as temporary shelters or squats.

Take the following anecdote from Laviolette's field note diary dated 24 January 2013:

Insomnia – so at about 1:00 AM, I decide to explore some derelict buildings off Tuukri Street near Kadriog Park, north-east of Tallinn's old town. After passing two or three 'easy access' ones, I remember another more mysterious structure. It's by a path down the edge of a harbour enclosure, where a new sewage/drainage pit had been started the summer before. This little house is on 'Petrooleumi' street. I circle around the small shack, next to a large fenced-off complex. In entering the bordered up window I find it difficult to squeeze through, not to get ripped up or destroy anything. It's not cold but quite wet and icy. Inside it's spacious and the building is completely in shambles. There's a floor to the left above two or three rooms. The window opposite catches my attention as the only light source. Darkness, nails and a deep pile of soft rubbish make it difficult to move past the window ledge.

Eventually I step down making a loud noise. Then, after some moments, there's a sudden realisation of some rumbling. Something, or someone else, is there. The sounds frighten off any further intrusion. My heart starts pounding, a fear which isn't so much of the unknown as it is of being caught in someone else's 'private' space. There's also the awkwardness of not being able to justify myself in Estonian or Russian, annoying whoever might be squatting the place even further. The other rooms of the building have more clearly open access floor spaces, with evidence of being lived in. Two washed t-shirts on hangers. In leaving the site I notice a rubbish bag at the gate and fairly fresh footprints near the back door. The ground near the front window equally has imprints beneath the fresh snow which I had not initially noticed. Someone has certainly been sleeping rough in this shack.

Indeed, the area in which this shack was found, near the university where we work, is one of Tallinn's archetypical threshold zones. Wedged between a heavily industrialised shipping harbour of ferry terminal loading docks and the leisure area of Kadriog Beach, with an esplanade walkway/cycle path that extends for miles towards the northeast, this formerly off-limits militarised part of Pirita Strand has for several decades now been left in limbo. It is a site to which both of us have often returned independently of each other, on some occasions to chronicle the changes taking place, at others to find gas masks or other artefacts from Estonia's post-Soviet past. One of the changes since 2013 is that the little shack described above has since been removed altogether. In fact, this whole area is now being developed and gentrified, so noticeably that it recently featured in a brief television report.

Coda: Anyone Anywhere

Urban spaces are increasingly regulated, designed, and commercialised, so the infiltration into shadowy spots helps to imagine not only an alternative world, but also a world in which we are better. Agreeing with Matthew Gandy, then, contemporary cities are entering into a new phase marked by an intensification of the disciplinary modes of intersection as well as the privatisation of public spaces and services. New disciplinary techniques, such as video surveillance, biometric measuring devices and private security services (uniformed as working from state institutions), have acquired oppressive spatial consequences (Gandy 2006: 507–8). In this scenario, it is our contention that the interaction between the body and our surroundings has become a critical terrain for new processes of transgression and inclusion.

Michel de Certeau dedicated *The Practice of the Everyday Life* (1984) ‘To the ordinary man. To a common hero’. However, de Certeau’s description of the ‘pedestrian’ appears as an abstract ideal figure, which has no gender, class, nationality or age. This is the difference, indeed, between what Rapport conceives as ‘Anyone’ and average notions of ‘everyman’. In our account, practitioners are an ‘Anyone’ who distinguishes him/herself from the rest by being actively engaged in role-playing and deploying an experimental demeanour, which is often imitative. Typical individuals get involved in edgework activities as an unordinary hobby, going to zones that are off the map just for the sake of sensation seeking.

The composition of a walking rhetoric praised by de Certeau emphasises the endless creativity of ordinary users and their tactical operations on foot. This ‘resistance’ has been described as ‘romantic’ and ‘depoliticised’ by several scholars (see Pinder 2005; Massey 2005). Urban exploration is also somehow distant from any politics of social justice and has more to do with geographical and embodied imagination. Otherwise, and as Stefan Morawski (1994) points out, anybody could be eligible for aimlessly strolling and *dérives*. Indeed, this is one of the outcomes of postmodernity. Jane Rendell also notes the obsession within contemporary urban discourse with figures that traverse space: the *flâneur*, the spy, the detective, the prostitute, the rambler. In her view, these all ‘represent urban explorations, passages of revelation, journeys of discovery ... they are spatial stories... . We are all spatial story-tellers, explorers, navigators, and discoverers, exchanging narratives of, and in, the city’ (Rendell 2001: 105).

In this article, the novelty we have attempted to introduce is that an ‘Anyone’ as urban explorer can constitute him or herself through a physical experience of risk and open-endedness, bringing about different notions of care, place and imagination. Also, we intended to rethink how the notion of transgression is changing in a world obsessed with changes, whereby limits are increasingly defined and ‘thinking outside the box’ is stressed as the only means to innovation. The idea of spatial transgression is of course a subjective one that should be expanded upon through further research. As Alastair Bonnett (1989) points out, spatial transgression might appear as playful, comical and even pointless. It is nonetheless effective when indicating, publicly, possibilities for options outside the dominant framework – separating what is possible from what is permitted.

This article hopes to contribute to the study of out of the ordinary behaviours, stamping experiences and their relation to places and temporal sequencing. We started by presenting the urban explorer ontologically and contextually, describing, through duo-auto-ethnographic methods, the way this ‘Anyone’ searches for meaning through sensation seeking and by encountering the derelict. In our detour, we then introduced autobiographical writing, which reveals the significance of subjective accounts for addressing the cultural geographies of cities. We also sought to offer insights into the subversive implications of liminality, in an attempt to better understand how transgressors manipulate risk and cope with uncertainty. As we have tried to show, exploring suspends the prevailing ‘urban order’, which is shown in its contingency by bringing to the city conceptions, representations and practices of the space that differ from designed and commodified ones. Urban exploration appears thus as a tactical, visceral and eccentric activity, often done by typical individuals and accessible to anyone.

We don’t exactly remember when our first exploration was. Yet both of us acknowledge an addictive charge in this practice, as if the borders were smaller, or the dose of adrenaline had to be bigger. Urban exploration is a practice of accessing shadowy places and documenting off-limit experiences. To understand this activity, we have paid attention to the relationship between biographies and space, as well as to the transformative experience of liminality. The ‘Anyone’ involved in exploration deploys an authorial body and conducts processes of border crossing, accessing areas that have been sacrificed. Hence, exploring is not just a pastime that exists in isolation from the world – penetrating buildings that are off of the map and seemingly empty. Rather, it is an activity that says something about a socially embodied

imagination and the search for meaning through the liminal possibilities created when trespassing over forbidden thresholds.

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